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LETTRE MENSUELLE SUR L'ÉVANGÉLISATION

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"The Monthly Letter about Evangelism" is a new publication of the World Council of Churches' Department on Evangelism. The purpose of the letter is to provide information about different types of evangelistic work which have proved effective and which have broken new ground in the great task of reaching people outside the life of the Church.

This first Monthly Letter was written by Rev. Henri Ochsenbein, the director of the Home Mission in Alsace, and of the Alsatian Missionary Brotherhood which is particularly concerned with evangelism in the industrial areas of Alsace.

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In the course of consultations and study conferences which we organized this year for pastors from industrial areas and particularly from the coal and steel mining regions, we tried to find out how the Christian communities in these areas "reach out" to the surrounding communities in which they are planted. We had the opportunity of hearing two people speak of their work: Pastor Philo Vernier, who for a year worked as a miner, and Pastor Schuster of Rüsselsheim (Opel-Gemeinde), who experimented in starting an open evangelising church within an industrial setting.

As early as 1929-31, while still a student of theology, Pastor Philo Vernier took part in the work of Pastor Brémond, the first worker-pastor in France and author of a thesis entitled "Explanation of the worker's world". At Ivry-sur-Seine he formed a study group on social questions in which about 50 students of the Student Christian Movement and anarchist and communist workers participated. Conversations he had during this time influenced his whole ministry. His wife and with one exception, the councillors of the congregation of the Belgian Christian Missionary Church of which he was a pastor, granted him permission to work for one year as a miner. This decision meant that the lay members of the Council had to take upon themselves the responsibility for certain duties which the pastor, owing to his work in the mines, could no longer fulfil. Philo Vernier chose work in the mines because this was the only occupation in which he knew he would not be depriving any one else of a job, and because it was among those workers that he could meet the real

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proletariat. The Protestant churches in Belgium were born among the proletariat, but now, in the third generation, they have undergone an intellectual and social transformation. Their members are now employees, foremen in the mines and even students. Workers in the Belgian mines are almost all foreigners nowadays, Poles, Estonians, D.P.s and above all Italians.

The Church must keep in contact with the working proletariat. Philo Vernier was convinced that in order to achieve this end, those whose training and education seemed to fit them for an intellectual career, should chose manual work voluntarily and of their own accord. As for himself, he felt that after six years as a pastor in the mining area and after seeing a great many miners live, suffer and die - in accidents or of silicosis -, he was called to try this experiment with the support of his church. In order to be sure that he was not mistaken in his belief, he had asked God to give him a sign whether he might try the experiment. The sales of work and appeals for funds had been stopped in his church. After a year it was faced with a deficit and the target had not been reached. Philo Vernier interpreted this fact as a sign telling him that he could earn the missing sum with his own hands. After a pastoral retreat he began his work as a miner on October 8th, 1952, and chose the night shift from 10 p.m. till 6 a.m. The fatigue resulting from this work began to tell on him before the first three weeks had elapsed. He now understood better why his parishioners after working eight hours daily side by side with the same man, do not eventually succeed in bringing him along to church services. The work of the night shift consists in moving the heavy machines and installing the equipment for the day shift. Taking down the iron pit-props is a particularly hard and dangerous job. During this work Pastor Vernier discovered the fellowship among the miners who have a natural attachment for one another; their courage in risking their lives while on duty, and the difficulty of refraining from coming to blows with a slacker if one has to work side by side with him. These experiences made him understand his parishioners better and think less severely of them.

What were the results of this experience? From the beginning he had had no ambitions as far as leading the workers to church was concerned; at the end of the first year he was asked to bury the father of a fellow miner; another miner registered as a church member; two more became subscribers to the Protestant Church bulletin; yet another joined the Pentecostalists.

Philo Vernier saw also that he would have to work towards some kind of reconciliation between the Belgians (who are mostly foremen or overseers) and the Italians who get bullied around by the Belgians who reproach them for coming to take their jobs away. Moreover, he learnt how much it means to be accepted as a real comrade. Of course the miners wondered why he had come to the mines. (Among the supposed reasons were: "because he wants to write a book" or "because his church can't pay him any longer".) Protestant miners from Germany were encouraged by his presence.

What was the effect on his home parish? Philo Vernier had hoped that during his absence the parishioners would take their responsibilities in the life of the community. They did not do so during the year he worked in the mines but afterwards there were some unexpected results. Today it is the lay people who look after the affairs of this church without a pastor (for a year now Philo Vernier has had a new post in France). He himself received a new inspiration for his ministry.

Philo Vernier also observed that the miners do not think much of their Protestant fellow-workers: "They have their mouths full of quotations from the Bible but they are not good mates", that is, they do not do a proper job and are not very co-operative. That explains why the results of the evangelistic effort of these Protestant workers are practically nil. However, there is a colliery in the district which is called "The Protestants' Pit" where Protestant miners have actually carried out an evangelistic campaign among their fellow-workers.

He did not have any contact with the "officials" (the bosses, engineers and delegates from the workers' trade unions) during the night shifts. But there was a chance for a conversation with the miners just before they descended as they usually arrived a good hour before work to have a chat. They are preoccupied above all with politics, their work and their families. In general they have little confidence in their trade-unions and political leaders. It is very difficult to start a conversation after work when the need for sleep is irresistible. His experience in the mines confirmed Philo Vernier's belief that it is necessary to break the pastors' monopoly in the churches, and to shake the people in the parishes out of their complacency and respectability.

Pastor Schuster and his experiences in Rüsselsheim

Pastor Schuster works in a large housing estate where the workers of the "Opel" car factories live. These factories employ at present 30.000 workers of whom 9.000 live on this estate where almost no other occupation is represented.

Pastor Schuster started his work on the estate by building a parish hall with 120 seats, a youth centre, a room for religious instruction, a meeting-place for the boy-scouts, and a vicarage where he keeps open house. The second stage of building included a kinder-garten for 120 children and living quarters for the nurse and the house-keeper. The third stage, which has now been reached, provides for a church which is not designed to be a sacred building only but to be the centre of community life. (It can be converted in a moment into a big hall with a stage). Pastor Schuster has set himself the aim of penetrating into the workers' world by first winning over the younger generation. The only bridge still existing between the workers' world and that of the church consists in those sacred ceremonies which provide a solemn setting for the most serious events of human life. One of the first tasks which Pastor Schuster and his team of workers set out to do was to disperse current misunderstandings about the Church. He tries to show the people that the Church comes to help people. For that it is necessary

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to meet the workers halfway in their problems and concerns and not to wait till they come themselves to Church. This means giving a particular structure to the life of the Church, and making these occasional contacts opportunities for realistic and honest encounters. So far he has managed to get together a group of about a hundred young people between 14 to 25 years of age, to whom he tries to explain the mission of the Church in this world. The parish hall is a real meeting-place always open to everybody, with a library, and from time to time, even a dance. Bible studies are planned in such a way as to get the young to participate and apply the Biblical message to the actual situation of young workers. Pastor Schuster aims more and more at including in his ministry what he calls the "Zwischenstationen zwischen Kanzel und Werkbank" (the intermediate stages between pulpit and work-bench). This implies establishing a number of organisations from which representatives come together in a council in order to share their problems and the results achieved in the different organisations - women's group, men's clubs, young families' groups, neighbours' groups and so on.

This study conference for pastors in industrial areas at which Pastor Philo Vernier and Pastor Schuster spoke was organised within the Alsation Missionary Brotherhood of which a high percentage of our young pastors are members.

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